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WEITERE INFORMATIONEN OK

An unending variety of topics

Friday, October 08, 2010

Petrus Sabbatius comes to power

The Roman Empire was a military dictatorship. Its emperors came and went in a relentless spree of assassinations and civil wars (example) that lasted for nearly 1500 years. One and one-half millennia of violent government extended across history from the victories of Octavian (a.k.a. Caesar Augustus) over his rivals in decades before Christ to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. Despite the violence, or perhaps because of it, Roman elites accumulated vast surpluses and left spectacular monuments unmatched until much later in European history.

By the opening of the 6th century the city of Rome itself was no longer a part of the Empire. Instead Italy was ruled by the Goths and the capital city of the remaining empire, "Romania", was Constantinople. This city (in modern times called Istanbul) controlled the strategic straights linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

No topics dominated the culture of Constantinople so much as (1) the horse races, and (2) the debate over the relative contributions of the divine and the human to the nature of Christ.

The debate over the nature of Christ divided Christians into numerous sects: Orthodox Catholics, Monophysites, Arians, Manicheans, Nestorians, and many others. The Orthodox Catholics believed that Christ was both God and man, Monophysites divine only, Arians human only, and there were a dizzying number of variations on and nuances to these dogmas. Theology was the hottest topic of debate and biggest motivation for political division and persecution in Constantinople. Constantinople was dominated by Orthodox Catholics and Monophysites, while the Arian heresy held by the Goths and Vandals that had taken over the Western part of the Empire was considered a heresy beyond the pale. Other positions, such as Manicheaism, were sometimes tolerated and sometimes not.

With the coming to power of Christianity the brutal gladiatorial fights had been suppressed and horse racing was now the dominant spectator sport. The Hippodrome in Constantinople was the main place of public gathering. Spectators shouted political opinions at the emperor, who in turn used the crowd to gauge public opinion. Indeed, for the normal citizen, this was the only form of political participation.

The racing teams and their colors – Red, White, Blue, Green – dated far back to the early Empire. By the 6th century, the two dominant teams were the Blues and the Greens. The political nature of the Hippodrome had converted their fans into political factions. The Blues tended to be government types, land owners, and Orthodox Catholics (or, during the frequent schisms with Rome, Chalcedonians). Greens tended to be merchants and Monophysites.

Pages

- Home

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Nick Szabo

"A premier thinker about history, law and economics, and the lessons they have for security." -- Adam Shostack, Emergent Chaos

"Szabo comes out with these essays that leave me in awe." -- Brian Dunbar

"Reading material that is eclectic, challenging and endlessly fascinating." -- Sean McGrath, Propylon

"Like most blogs worth my attention, this blog is updated only infrequently. That is because the authors of blogs worth my attention only post when they have something to say that is true, relevant and not already known by their audience. Most of the human race does not have the skill to know when an idea has these three properties. The skill is particularly rare in the fields of politics and economics, which is why this blog is such a rare and valuable thing." -- Richard Hollerith

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During the reign of Anastasius, in a village in Illyria (probably in modern Macedonia just north of modern Greece), where the natives still spoke a passable Latin, lived a young peasant bachelor. Instead of taking up farming he left the village and came to Constantinople to join the army. Dropping his humble family name and styling himself "Justin" – "just man" -- he fought in several wars and was promoted through the ranks of the palace guards. Eventually he was promoted to Count (head) of the Excubitors, one of the two palace guard groups.

Justin then adopted his nephew, one Petrus Sabbatius, and brought him to Constantinople. Sabbatius too dropped his humble name and, aspiring to the achievements of his uncle and benefactor, restyled himself "Justinian".

Justin's master, the emperor Anastatius, was a Green and Monophysite. Justin, and to an even greater degree his nephew, were Orthodox Catholics (or during the schism of the time Chalcedonians) who supported the Blue faction.

Anastasius failed to make formal provisions for the succession. His death in 518 threw Constantiople into confusion, as none his three nephews had strong support. The Manichean eunuch Amantius, Chamberlain to Anastasius, hoped to be a power behind the throne of his chosen puppet, an obscure character named Theocritus. The palace guards had traditionally dominated the succession in Rome, so Amantius needed the support of at least one of the two palace guard groups, the Excubitors and the Scholarians.

Justin, head of the Excubitors, secretly promised to support Theocritus and took money from Amantius to bribe the support of influential fence-sitters. But instead of carrying out this secret plot, Justin lobbied and bullied the Blues, their Senate allies (most Senators were Blue), and his own soldiers. Finally winning acclamation of most of the Blues in the Hippodrome, and fearful acquiescence of the Greens, Justin assumed the purple robes of emperor.

Roman imperial successions had always been highly irregular, but the ideal of authority that other political players would most accept is suggested by Justin's letter, upon assuming power, to the Pope in Rome: "We have been elected to the Empire by the favor of the indivisible Trinity, by the choice of the highest ministers of the sacred Palace, and of the Senate, and finally by the election of the army."

To cover his tracks, Justin had Amantius and Theocritus executed, under the pretext that Amantius (a heretic Manichean, but tolerated under Anastatius) had insulted the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople. He named his nephew Count of the Domestics. Justinian was a, or perhaps the, power behind the throne. Falling in love with a repentant prostitute, Theodora, he had Justin's quaestor, Proclus, cleverly draft a law that allowed him to marry a former prostitute while still forbidding such a degrading marriage to other Senators.

Early in 527 AD, Justin fell sick and named Justinian Augustus (co-ruler) and successor. A few months later, Justin died and Justinian at age 45 became emperor.

The former Petrus Sabbatius was to lavish his adoptive name and the empire's treasure on cities new and old, grand buildings, and wars of reconquest. Most importantly for our purposes, Justinian would plaster his just-sounding name on a recompilation of Roman law that has profoundly shaped the West down to our own time.

Coming: Tribonian, John of Cappadocia, revolt, massacre, prostration, and the the birth of a bloody code.

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Blog Archive

- ► 2018 (1)
- ► 2017 (3)
- ► 2016 (4)
- ► 2015 (3)
- ► 2014 (3)
- ► 2013 (3)
- ► 2012 (8)
- ► 2011 (12)
- ▼ 2010 (9)
  - ► December (1)
  - ▼ October (4)
    - Malthus and capital
    - Elements, evolution, and the nitrogen crisis
    - Petrus Sabbatius comes to power
    - Signals, gifts, and politics
  - ► September (2)
  - ► February (2)
- ► 2009 (29)
- ► 2008 (55)
- ► 2007 (47)
- ► 2006 (130)
- ► 2005 (44)

Posted by Nick Szabo at 8:28 PM

6 comments:

Alrenous said...

but the ideal of authority that other political players would most accept

I read that Christianity did away with using high standing as proof of virtue, but even if true such transitions take time.

Wouldn't have the Romans found Justin's win to be itself proof of divine favour?

I've also read that Romans valued cruelty in their leaders. Is this true?

4:34 PM

nick said...

I read that Christianity did away with using high standing as proof of virtue

That's definitely true of early Christians, and to some extent remained true for Western Orthodox Christians, but Eastern Orthodox Christians were if anything accentuating leadership as a sign of virtue by the time of Justin. Christian Roman emperors were considered (or at least considered themselves) "elected" by God as well as secondarily by the army, palace guards, senate and "the people" (acclaim of the Hippodrome crowd). In contrast to Western leaders (esp. between 1100 and 1500) they were caesaropapist: heads Church as well as heads of State.

Christian Roman artwork often depicted a celestial hierarchy of angels, prophets, apostles, etc. which basically look like the depictions of the emperor and his tax collector and military hierarchies except that the angels have wings.

Comparing between the pagan emperor (often loosely to seriously spoken of as the son of a god, because they were usually sons, even if adopted, of emperors deified when deceased), and the Eastern Orthodox caesaropapist model, it's hard to say which one had more divine authority or virtue imputed by same.

I've also read that Romans valued cruelty in their leaders. Is this true?

The pagan Romans valued cruelty rather generally unless directed at their own family. After Christians came there was still quite a bit of cruelty, in particular judicial and tax collection torture were retained, but they were usually ashamed of it and tried to deny or hide it, and did away with public spectacles featuring cruelty such as the gladiatorial games.

8:07 PM

Alrenous said...

I see, thanks.

Christian Roman artwork often [...] look like the depictions of the emperor and his tax collector and military hierarchies except that the angels have wings.

Ha! More proof that propaganda has advanced as much as most other fields. We'd find that childishly transparent today.

3:19 AM

TGGP said...

Daniel Larison thinks the term "caesaropapism" is inappropriate.

5:15 PM

nick said...

I've seen a ton of evidence for Byzantine caesaropapism but I'd love to hear Larison's evidence to the contrary. The Byzantine emperor could and did preside over doctrinal councils, require the patriarchs to prostrate themselves to him, issue ecclesiastical edicts, call himself "Pontifex Maximus" (a title used by both the head of the old pagan state religion and the Pope), appoint and depose patriarchs, and so on. Byzantine icons depict the emperor standing in a front of his subordinate patriarchs, indicating his superior position, whereas Western Catholic icons generally depict pope and emperor in equal positions. The Byzantine emperor was considered a "vicar of Christ" (another term used by the Western Pope) and even more loftily a "mimesis of Christ" (an imitation of Christ on earth).

Larison is accurate to call the Protestant state churches caesaropapist, but IMHO no moreso than Byzantium's, and soon done under by the plethora of Protestant sects, which in Byzantium were generally persecuted out of existence (the main exception being the Monophysites who were too large to persecute). The Byzantine empire started out with its own plethora of Christianities (Manichaen, Nestorian, Coptic, Arian, etc. etc.) and ended up after a few centuries of persecutions with just two (Orthodox and Monophysite). In contrast Puritans, Quakers, Methodists, Unitarians, and many other nonconformists grew and thrived around the relaxed spiritual rule of the King-headed Church of England. I understand of course why Catholics have a big beef against the Church of England, but that doesn't make it more caesaropapist than Byzantium.

I agree with Larison's point that his interlocutor is abusing the term "caesaropapist", but it's hardly due to the uselessness of the term. Caesaropapism is a word utterly essential as the name for a historically very real phenomenon (the strong influence of many important secular rulers over religion) and proposing we stop using it is tantamount to proposing that we forget about important parts of history.

The term also applies, BTW, to most rulers of major civilizations before Byzantium -- the pagan Roman emperors, and before them the Egyptian pharaohs, ancient kings of Sumer and Assyria, and many others. Again, these were usually heads of religion as well as heads of state, a very different thing from the Western Catholic model of religion not controlled by the secular ruler (indeed the very idea of a purely secular ruler), and I'd think that Catholics of all people would want to preserve that distinction.

10:30 PM

nick said...

P.S. by "purely secular" I refer to the secular rulers having no say over religious doctrine or who holds religious offices (and even in the late Middle Ages little say over family and related moral law), not to the view of many on the modern left that the decisions of secular rulers should not be informed or motivated by their religious beliefs.

Berman, _Law and Revolution_, which TGGP mentioned in another thread had a good account of the Western Catholic reification of the doctrine of the separate spiritual and secular jurisdictions in the 11th and 12th centuries. The idea of not subordinating religion to the secular ruler dates back to early Christianity (which before being made the official religion of the Empire was persecuted for refusing to participate in the official civic religion), and to Augustine who made the distinction between the City of Man and the City of God. This early Christian tradition of refusing to bow to secular authority, dealt blows by the Roman imperial apparatus from Constantine on forward, revived in the West when the Western Empire crumbled but was largely destroyed in the Eastern Empire by the time of Justinian.

11:23 PM

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